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THE VATICAN

The Undiplomatic Bulgarian

A defector points the finger toward Moscow

From the start, the evidence has come in bits and pieces, with each new shred making the mystery only more intriguing. Was the Soviet Union, acting through Bulgaria, behind the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II by Turkish Terrorist Mehmet Ali Agca on that sunny May afternoon in 1981? The latest fragment does not answer that question once and for all, but it tightens the web of circumstantial evidence around the Kremlin. A Bulgarian embassy worker who defected to France in 1981 has told French intelligence officials that the KGB devised the plot to kill the Pope out of fear that the Polish-born prelate was part of a

Zbigniew Brzezinski's supposed purpose: to use the Pope to inspire further unrest in Poland and eventually to wrench the country out of the Soviet orbit. Mantarov claims that he was told that as the troubles in Poland mounted, and as the Pontiff came to be identified with the budding Solidarity movement, Soviet authorities gave the command to "eliminate" the Pope. They allegedly handed the assignment to the Bulgarians, long known for their subservience to the Kremlin's wishes.

The Bulgarians, according to Mantarov, picked Agca as the assassin because he was known as a right-winger with no ties to any Communist country. In

gave French officials an account charging that the KGB ordered the papal assassination. TIME has also learned that Mantarov did not have diplomatic status at the Bulgarian embassy; he was, in fact, a technician attached to the commercial section. And at least one important detail in the *Times* story may be wrong: Bulgarian émigrés living in Paris insist that Mantarov defected on April 11, 1981, not the following July. If the earlier date is correct, Mantarov would have defected before the assassination attempt. The timing is crucial, since Mantarov then could have told French authorities about the plot before the attempt took place. What makes this speculation important is that Alexandre de Marenches, then head of French intelligence, has said he had solid evidence in late April 1981 that an assassination attempt against the Pope was imminent. He was so confident of his information that he dis-



A mosaic of terrorism: Mehmet Ali Agca, left, who shot John Paul II in May 1981; Sergei Antonov, upper right, and Luigi Scricciolo, lower right, two Bulgarian agents named Dimiter, orders from Zbigniew Brzezinski and a contract on a papal assassin.

U.S.-inspired scheme to undermine the Polish government.

According to an account published in the New York *Times*, the talkative official is Iordan Mantarov, 48, who was last posted as deputy commercial attaché at the Bulgarian embassy in Paris. The *Times* said that Mantarov defected in July 1981, two months after the failed assassination. While being debriefed by French intelligence officials, Mantarov reportedly said that a close friend in the Bulgarian state security agency named Dimiter Savov had given him details about a KGB plan to murder the Pontiff.

Savov is said to have told Mantarov that the KGB concluded in 1979 that Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Jimmy Carter's Polish-born National Security Adviser, had somehow engineered the election of

November 1979, unknown accomplices slipped Agca out of a Turkish prison. Agca then began a murky trek that ended in St. Peter's Square on May 13, 1981. According to Mantarov, the Turk was to meet his own fate there as well: he was supposed to be killed immediately after shooting the Pope.

The Bulgarians, predictably, dismissed Mantarov's account. An embassy spokesman in Rome described Mantarov as nothing more than a mechanic formerly employed by a Bulgarian firm in France. Mantarov, meanwhile, has dropped out of sight. French intelligence officials refused to admit last week that they had ever spoken to him, let alone that he had told them anything about the Bulgarian connection. Mantarov is most likely still in French custody and living under a false name.

patched a pair of deputies to the Vatican to advise papal aides of the plot.

Even though it is not known when Mantarov told French authorities about the alleged KGB involvement, Paris has been remarkably stingy in sharing its information. The French are believed to have briefed Washington only after they knew that what Mantarov had to say was going to be made public. Nor does it appear that the French told Italian authorities about Mantarov, despite the fact that Italian Judge Ilario Martella has been conducting a meticulous investigation into the assassination attempt for the past 17 months. When TIME Rome Correspondent Barry Kalb asked Martella last week if he had been told about Mantarov, Martella replied flatly: "Never."

How valuable is Mantarov's account?